

Detroit Free Press
Op-Ed
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I was dismayed to see your editorial about testing welfare applicants in light of last week's preliminary ruling by U.S. District Judge Victoria Roberts. I was also surprised that the Judge would go out on a limb at this point stating that our pilot program is unconstitutional. That decision must be made after the hearing scheduled for December 20, 1999.

What Judge Roberts did last week was issue a temporary restraining order (TRO) prohibiting the state from proceeding with the policy until the outcome of the December hearing. On December 20, we presume we will receive a fair and balanced hearing on whether to end or continue the TRO indefinitely. At that hearing the state also expects the court to hear arguments on FIA's motion to dismiss the entire case.

Berrien, Alpena/Presque Isle Counties and the Greenfield/Joy District Office in Wayne County began piloting drug testing as a condition of eligibility October 1. We are not singling out poor people. Our pilot is focused on identifying families where substance abuse exists so that we can provide assessment and treatment. It is common knowledge that since the onset of welfare reform, Michigan has required employable recipients to work in exchange for their public assistance check. That is a federal requirement as well. The majority of recipients and taxpayers support that goal and drug testing as well.

Substance abuse problems keep people from getting, keeping or progressing on a job. Likewise it is a fact that drug testing by employers in Michigan is common. People who test positive for drugs don't get hired. In Berrien County, one of the pilots, estimates range as high as 80 percent of the employers requiring drug testing as a condition of employment. The state should not send individuals who are substance abusers to these employers if we know they will fail. Instead, the state is offering treatment.

As to whether or not there are criminal underpinnings in our requirement, there are not. Someone who tests positive will be afforded assessment and treatment for their drug problem while they receive financial assistance. That doesn't sound criminal to me.

Let's face it, there is more at stake here than a job. The families of substance abusers pay a hefty price for that abuse, and our caseload is comprised of families...families that have children. If we can help the families who have a substance abuse problem eliminate the barrier of substance abuse and get a job, we have served the family doubly. A substance abuse free family is a much stronger family.

As for your admonition that Michigan should focus on support services for those who have found jobs, we have systematically focused on barriers to employment. First day care, then transportation, job training, housing and medical coverage and now, just as formidable a barrier, substance abuse.

As for the allegation that our policy is humiliating or an invasion of privacy, I disagree. Time and time again, I have heard support from our customers for this policy. Many of those tested during the first month of the pilot told staff that “it was about time.” That doesn’t sound like individuals who feel their rights are being violated.

In contrast, I find it interesting that a policy, public for many months, and in operation a little over one month, with hundreds having completed the drug test, could not produce more than one or two individuals alleged to be potentially harmed by the policy.

The general public and our customers overwhelmingly support including drug testing as a condition of eligibility for public assistance. Both Congress and the Michigan legislature have authorized drug testing, and employers throughout the state require it as part of the job application process. We believe identification of and treatment for substance abuse is fundamental to the concept of strengthening families. I believe we will prevail in court.

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